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ABSTRACT

Child caregivers should not answer children's questions in ways that enable children to create stereotypical categories. Because children are aware of differences among the peers and the adults they encounter, children's questions must be answered accurately and in a developmentally appropriate way. When questions about individual difference arise, caregivers should assign no value to any difference. Societal values that prefer one difference over another--for example, white over black, rich over poor, male over female--stand in opposition to each child's right to full self-concept development. Because teachers are the central value transmitters in the classroom, they must support the individual differences of each child by examining their own fears, uncertainties, prejudices, and limitations. They must then honestly confront themselves when they fail to support a child that is different. Four dimensions of individual difference are discussed: gender, biracial children, handicapped children, and minority children. For each difference, three issues are addressed: (1) what the teacher needs to know about the difference; (2) how the teacher should support the difference in the classroom and child care center; and (3) how the teacher should work with parents to support children with the difference. (RH)

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Supporting Individual Differences in the Classroom

Presentation given at Shreveport on October 8, 1988, by Francis Wardle, PhD.

Sponsored by the Black/White Task Force and Child Care Services, Inc.

Children's Development of Concepts

Children develop ideas about the world by creating a theory, or rule, and then proving the theory to be true or not. For example, after throwing a stone into the air, and seeing it drop to the ground - and throwing toys into the air, and seeing them do the same thing - a child will theorize that everything falls to the ground. So they will throw all sorts of things into the air. Their theory stands up - except for certain exceptions (birds and balloons).

Children will experiment with water. Probably they will theorize all things sink in water. But after trying pieces of wood, etc., they will learn this is incorrect.

Balls bounce. All balls bounce (although to different heights).

So young children are generalists. You could say they are stereotypers - they want to put everything they experience into neat categories.

Young children are also very curious. Why is the sky blue? Why does the ostrich not fly? Why do leaves turn color?

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Young children would like to place the answers to all their questions into nice simple theories and categories: into stereotypical boxes. This is why the role of the child care provider is so critical. We cannot allow teachers of young children to answer children's questions in a way that enables the child to create stereotypical categories.

Today we will address how child care providers and teachers can support individual differences in the classroom.

Differences and Similarities

People are characterized by two general areas: the ways we are the same; and the ways we are different.

a). Similarities

We all have emotions: sad, happy, angry, frustrated, etc.. We all have a heritage and history; we all belong to a country, community, and family. We all (except children with severe handicaps), have the same basic physical makeup: two eyes, a nose, mouth, skin, hair, two arms, two legs, fingers, toes, feet, etc.. We all have the capacity to learn and grow; the capacity to relate to other humans. We all can enjoy culture: art, books, dance, music, photos, architecture. We all belong to a culture, ethnic or religious group. We all eat, and need to feel good about ourselves.

All these similarities make us members of the family of men and women; they make us equal; they enable us

to be sensitive to others, and they make us able to hurt and be hurt, to love and be loved. They demand that we treat each other with respect.

b). Individual Differences

These include the type of music, dance, books, films, etc., that we like; the kind of religious group we belong to, the nation in which we were born, the language we use to communicate, and our physical descriptors: weight, height, color of hair, color of skin, sex, physical abilities, and age. Differences include the kind of family we are from: one parent, two parents, extended, blended, adoptive, foster, interracial, etc.

And differences include an individual culture, race, intelligence, likes, dislikes, what we are good at, what we are not good at, income, skills, parents and number of siblings.

Children are aware of these differences - they are very curious! They ask many questions. We must answer these questions accurately and developmentally appropriately. We must remember: all children have individual differences; all people have individual differences.

There Should Be No Value Placed On Individual Differences

A child who lives in a large house is no better than a homeless child; a gifted child is no better than a mentally delayed child, and a physically gifted child is no better than a child with CP. We should not view a child of

born-again Christian parents in a more favorable light than a child of atheist parents; a white child should not be favored over a minority child.

Intellectually we know individual differences should not have value placed on them. But we are products of a society that does place value on certain differences. Generally this society places a negative value on children with these differences: skin color, hair texture, poverty, a non-English language, a handicap (physical or mental), behavior problems, a disease, and a lifestyle very different from that of the teacher. Teachers are products of this society; therefore, we have the prejudices of this society.

The Teacher And Individual Differences

The teacher is the central value transmitter in a school or child - care program. Therefore, to have a program that supports the individual differences of each child, we must have teachers who support each child's right to full self concept development.

How do we achieve this?

Program administrators must set the expectations that each teacher support each child. The program needs to provide training for the staff. And each teacher must examine her own fears, uncertainties, prejudices and limitations. Teachers must then honestly confront areas where they don't support a child with a certain individual difference.

Targeting 4 Individual Differences

In this session we will address 4 individual differences: gender, biracial children, handicapped children, and minority children. For each of these individual differences 3 issues will be addressed: what the teacher needs to know about the difference: how the teacher should support the differences in the classroom and child care center, and how the teacher should work with parents to support children with these differences.

General Statements About Teaching Individual Difference

In supporting individual differences in the classroom, there are several things to keep in mind:

1). Children are naturally curious about anything they view as different, strange, funny or unusual. "Why does Johnny have to be in a wheelchair? Why does Linda talk funny? Why does Kintaro have funny eyes?"

2). Teachers need to respond to these questions accurately, developmentally appropriately, and in a way that supports the child with the individual difference.

3). Teachers need to respond immediately if a child makes a negative comment about a child's individual difference.

4). The administration of a child care program needs to develop procedures for addressing when a teacher perpetuates stereotypes and prejudices, and when a parent perpetuates stereotypes and prejudices.

5). Because children tend to naturally develop categories and stereotypes, and because society places negative value on certain individual differences, a child care program must actively work to create a climate - through trainings, materials, posters, activities, etc. - directed at destroying misconceptions, stereotypes and prejudices. A program cannot just be neutral, because society is not neutral.

Gender Differences

1. What Teachers Should Know

1).Gender identity is based on one thing only: anatomy. The rest of the identifying aspects are cultural: dress, roles, behavior, likes, dislikes, expectations, fashions, makeup, etc..

2). Children are not sure what makes a boy a boy, and a girl a girl. Generally they think it's looks, tasks, clothes, who plays with dolls, work roles, family roles, and behavior.

3). Children think gender can change - they are not convinced it is a constant. They believe it can change based on what they wear, who they play with, etc.. They need help understanding that gender is a constant, that it is not influenced by what you wear or what you do.

4). Already at age 4 children have fairly firm ideas about gender and gender rules - and these ideas tend to be sexist and stereotypical: girls cannot play football;

girls can't be fire fighters; boys should not hold babies, etc..

II. How to Support Gender Differences in the Classroom

1.) Provide ways to contradict biases children bring to school; provide opportunities for new ways of thinking. This can be done by intervening in children's conversations, correcting statements by children, suggesting new play activities, inviting community people into the classroom, reading books, using puppets, etc.. Challenge the notion girls must wear dresses, boys pants; show the students boys can play with dolls, girls can be doctors, girls can play active and rough games, and girls can be police officers and fire fighters.

2). Organize the environment to encourage non-sex stereotypical behavior. Change the dramatic play area by adding a typewriter, adding machine, workbench, hard hats, tool box, lunch box, doctor's bag and have parents send in props from their work world.

Place the block area next to the dramatic play area; move housekeeping area outside, next to a sand box - and include sand toys, trucks, etc..

Add materials to the block area and to the wood bench to encourage girls: styrofoam, cloth, yarn, stick-on paper, small tables, etc..

3). Direct Teacher Intervention

The teacher should develop procedures that require both girls and boys to use each interest area in the center: one-day-a-week where everyone plays with blocks; girls only time in the block area once-a-week; match girls and boys in groups that use interest areas; boys only art time, and spend special time with a child that is reluctant to engage in certain activities, by modeling the activity with the child.

4). Curriculum Activities

Do an art project where children cut out girls and boys, and men and women, in a variety of clothing, and showing a variety of activities - including non traditional roles - and create a large poster or collage.

Read books that expand gender role understanding: a father who stays home, single mother who works, female fire fighter, etc.. Invite a variety of people and families to visit the classroom. Read books about children who challenge gender stereotyping: a girl who likes climbing trees, a boy who likes to look after his baby sister, etc..

When assigning tasks in the classroom - or when soliciting student volunteers - do not allow students to break up the tasks by traditional sex roles.

III. Working with Parents to Support Gender Differences in the Classroom

Children develop most of their stereotypical ideas from home. You need to communicate to your parents both the

center's philosophy on gender identity, and what you are doing in the classroom to implement the philosophy. Include in the communication the reason for what you are doing, relevant training parents can attend, and ways the parents can be included in your curriculum and classroom activities.

Also, give parents a contact person in the center they can call and talk to, if they have concerns about what is happening in the classroom around supporting gender differences.

There is always a question of how to handle a parent who disagrees with what occurs in the center. Most of this problem, I believe, can be solved by communicating very accurately to parents at the time they enroll their child, the philosophy and position of the center, and then keeping lines of communication open throughout the year. I believe every program should clearly define their philosophy on this issue - just as you would on discipline, curriculum, meals and nap-times. Parents who do not agree with your philosophy on any of these areas should be encouraged to seek a program that fits their needs.

Biracial Children

IV. What Teachers Should Know

1). The number of biracial children in this country continues to grow. All early childhood programs (except segregated ones) will need to know how to meet the needs of these children.

2). By age four children are very curious (and sometimes opinionated) about the physical differences of biracial children.

3). Many parents of biracial children are confused about their children's identity, and about the best way to support their child's self concept development. They are often very sensitive about the racial identity of their child, and are seeking understanding and support from their child's program.

4). More and more parents of biracial children are raising their children as a rich combination of both parents' cultural, racial, and historical backgrounds - be that black/white; Hispanic/white, black/Hispanic, etc..

5). There is a growing acknowledgement that these children are neither black or white, that genetically they are a mixture, and that almost every American, to some degree, is mixed genetically and culturally.

6). Biracial children have the same developmental needs and identity needs as do all other children; and they do not have more problems than non biracial children. Biracial children are normal children with a specific individual difference.

7). The historical - and sometimes current - reasons against interracial marriage (and therefore biracial children) are based on laws, prejudice, and fear - not on fact or genetic reasoning.

8). Teachers must believe interracial families and biracial children have the same rights as all other families and children in their program, for the teachers to be effective.

V. How to Support Biracial Children in the Classroom

1). Find out from the parents of your biracial children how their child's identity is supported at home. If the parent is either confused about this issue, or has never really addressed it, suggest they explore the idea of a biracial identity for their child (rather than black, white, or just a child). Provide resource materials - books and articles - to help them; if there is an interracial support group in your community, suggest they join.

2). Allow children to openly ask questions to explore their curiosity about biracial children:

"How come your mother's white and your not?"

"What are you anyway, white or black?"

"Do you come from Africa?"

"Why is your skin brown and your hair blond?"

"Why are you black, but your skin isn't?"

Answer these questions from the perspective of the child's parents, and the way we get our physical characteristics from our parents. Use non-biracial children to illustrate the point.

3). Do lots of classroom activities that involve mixing and matching. Mix paints, food colors, dyes,

crayons, colored plastic and colored tissue paper (put these on windows or against lights). Mix colors and find crayons that will match each child's skin color. Have all children do self portraits that require filling in the correct skin color.

4). Encourage the children to compare each other's physical features. What is the same? - 5 fingers, two arms, two eyes, 1 head, two feet, etc. What is different? - Hair color, eye color, height, foot size, hair texture, skin color, and clothes. Allow children to touch each other's hair, compare heights by standing back to back, compare hand size and skin color by placing their hands together.

5). Create art projects that show different kinds of families: posters, books, murals, etc.. Include biracial families (also Asian/White, Native American/black, Hispanic/White), with all sorts of other families.

6). Have your children create their family tree - using photographs and drawings from home. These family trees should go as far back in history as possible, and should include national and linguistic backgrounds.

7). Have a family day where children invite their parents, grand parents, and extended family to the school.

8). Support dramatic play and fantasy play situations where children might either imitate their interracial parents, or just experiment with one white child and black child "playing house." Intervene if a child says

"You can't be his wife, because he's black;" or "You can't be my daddy, because you're the wrong color."

9). Support the biracial child if negative comments are made towards him. Explain the biracial child's physical appearance to other children by showing all children get physical characteristics from both parents, and naturally, the biracial child received these from his black and white parents.

10). Provide books, posters, dolls, etc., that show mixed children. Don't break down curriculum materials into neat ethnic categories: a black doll, white doll, Hispanic doll and Asian doll, etc.. You need to convey the idea physical combinations are valid.

11). Many interracial children are confused about their identity. Help them talk about it; allow them to act out their situation in fantasy and dramatic play activities; talk to their parents.

V. <u>How to Work with Parents</u>

1). It is critical to talk to the biracial child's parent(s) about how the child's identity is supported at home, and how they want it supported at school. Initiate this discussion when the child is enrolled; continue it at subsequent teacher conferences.

2). Talk to other parents about the identity of biracial children. Most parents need to be educated about this new group. Parent meetings, newsletters, and bulletin boards can all be used for this process. Because children

reflect the thinking and behavior of their parents, it's essential to impact parent attitudes.

3). Parents of children who continually harass a biracial child must be confronted. Tell the parent negative behavior toward biracial children is no less acceptable than biting, hitting, and bad language.

4). Invite parents and other relatives of biracial children to visit the center, and openly talk to all the children.

5). Provide support and discussion for parents of biracial children who are seeking ways to develop the biracial identity of their child, or who are confused about that identity. Encourage these parents to read material on the subject, talk to other interracial parents, and explore the issue. Provide lists of support groups, resources for books and materials, and names of other parents that could provide insight and support.

Handicapped Children

VII. What Teachers Should Know

1). If the teacher has a handicapped child in their classroom, the teacher should have accurate information on the cause of the child's handicap.

2). The teacher should know what the handicapped child can do.

3). The teacher must know what equipment, medicines, protection, etc., the child must have.

4). The teacher should know how to explain the child's handicap to young children, in an accurate, objective, non-emotional, developmentally appropriate way.

5). The teacher must believe the handicapped child can meet his full physical and mental potential, and has a right to meet that potential within the classroom setting.

6). Relevant laws pertaining to the parent s and child's rights, and the school's responsibilities.

7). How the parents of the handicapped child communicates the child s handicap to other children and parents.

8). Understand that non-handicapped children have fears about handicapped children.

9). Young children believe a handicapped child has a temporary condition, like an illness. They believe they can "catch" the handicap. They might also believe the handicapped child has the handicap as a punishment for bad behavior.

10). Often a child's fear of a handicapped child is voiced as rejection, "I hate Johnny."

VIII. <u>How to Support Handicapped Children in the Classroom</u>

1). Find out when a child can do a task on his own, when he needs help, and when he will accept help from other children. Other children can learn to ask the handicapped child, "Do you want help now?", if they are not sure.

2). Help handicapped children to participate in games - don't allow them to be excluded.

3). Encourage all children to talk about handicaps.

4). Provide accurate, developmentally appropriate knowledge to all the children about the child's handicap.

5). Use books that include handicapped adults and children. Ask your children, "Do you know someone like the little boy in the story?"

6). Provide wheel chairs, crutches, aides, etc., for non handicapped children to use. Have each child experience trying to use a wheel chair: go up stairs, negotiate a bathroom; get into the school van. Then encourage the children to talk about the difficulties of getting around in a wheel chair.

7). Use dolls with various physical handicaps, and use them to trigger discussions.

8). Blindfold children one by one so they can experience what it is like to be blind.

9). Teach songs, children's first names, and other familiar labels, in sign language. Several good books are available.

10). Talk about what handicapped people can do.

"Can a handicapped person be a mother? A father?"

"Can a handicapped person be a teacher? A writer?"

"An artist? A politician? A factory worker? A typist?" etc. Use books to trigger the discussion.

11). Invite handicapped people to visit the classroom and talk to your students.

12). Visit a place that employs handicapped workers.

13). Take some field trips to places that have made adaptations for handicap people: ramps, elevators with braille numbers; nature trails with braille titles, parking lots with handicap zones.

14). Help handicap children find words to answer questions from other children, including that they don't want to answer certain questions.

IX. Working with Parents

1). Find out from the parents of a handicapped children how they explain the handicap to other children.

2). Find out from the parent exactly what the handicapped child can do.

3). Provide the parents with information about support groups, materials, etc..

4). Ask the parent if there are adjustments that can be made in the school and classroom for her child.

5). Provide information to the other parents about the handicapped child, about how the classroom will support that child, and about the school's position on supporting handicapped children and their families.

6). Provide information to other parents about how to respond accurately to their child's question about the handicapped child.

Supporting Racial Differences and Similarities

X. What the Teacher Should Know and Believe

1). Figuring out who I am, how I feel about me, my family, and you, is a central task occupying the mind of 3 to 5 year olds. This process continues throughout the child's school years.

2). Children of all ethnic and racial backgrounds share many important physical and non physical characteristics. They have more similarities than differences.

3). Race is not a scientifically accurate way of categorizing people. Rather it is a cultural, historic, and social means of viewing people with certain physical characteristics.

4).All children need help developing positive feelings about their physical characteristics, and about being like some children, and different from others.

5). Children of age 3 - 5, are very aware of physical differences, and naturally wonder where they fit in to these differences and similarities.

6). This age child does notice skin color, hair texture, eye shape and other physical characteristics. In fact, because this age child's observations are largely

dictated by salient features, these characteristics are very noticeable to them.

7). Children are very curious about how they got their individual differences. They develop strange theories to explain these differences.

8). Children do not know that physical characteristics are constant. They ask questions, like,

"Will Jimmy get darker?"

"If I eat Japanese food, will my eyes change - will they be like Kintaro s?"

9). Names adults use to define racial and ethnic categories confuse children:

"Teacher, Maia's not black, she's brown."

(Again - remember this age child is interested in salient physical characteristics: color, shape, size; not in abstract labels. To a child a label should accurately describe the object).

10). A teacher must seriously believe each child in the classroom is an individual, with individual characteristics, and is capable of reaching his/her full, individual potential

XI. <u>How to Support Racial/Ethnic Differences in the Classroom</u>

1). Provide an open, supportive environment where children can ask questions and receive accurate answers. Explain individual ethnic and racial differences using these perspectives:

a). the child's parents and grandparents

b). the national heritage of relatives: N. Europe, Africa, Mexico, West Indian, etc.

c). stress that all individual differences are beautiful.

2). Provide a wealth of multicultural materials and activities in the classroom: books, dolls, posters, photos, music, dance, art, artifacts, visitors and field trips.

3). Develop a book around the physical characteristics of each child and staff person in the classroom. Use color photos. Ask each child to describe himself - and write that information in the book. Have each child make a self-portrait for the book.

4). Encourage children to mix paints and use crayons that accurately match their skin color.

5). Have each child lie down in a sheet of butcher paper, trace around the child, then have the child fill in the outline.

6). Read books to the children about a variety of people that have physical differences. Use books with illustrations. Talk about the richness, variety, and beauty of individual differences to the children.

7). Make a bulletin board - with photos and pictures - of each child and her family.

8). Set limits on non acceptable behavior toward a child who is different; intervene immediately when a problem

arises; address these problems the same way you would address any other problems that occur in the classroom. Do not allow any negative behavior based on individual differences. For example, don't accept, "I didn't want to play with Johnny because he's black.vs

9). When children are having problems with other children, make sure the real reason for the conflict is addressed. Don't allow race to become an issue when it really isn't. "She stole my truck," "she ate my bread," "she pulled my hair," are all specific issues that have nothing to do with race - so don't let race come into the classroom.

10). Support any child who is the target of discrimination. Let them know they are okay, and that some people have trouble with differences.

11). Encourage positive feelings about black and brown colors, people, and families. Use Paul Robeson's "My Curly Headed Baby," "Oscar Brown's, Little Brown Baby," etc.

12). Read books to the children about a vast variety of backgrounds - from all over the world. Also read about different families. Don't just expose your children to books that represent children in your classroom.

13). Create a poster, "Beautiful Children and Grown-ups Come in All Colors."

14). Discuss physical characteristics your children have that are the same: heads, hands, fingers, eyes, hair, ears, mouth, legs, feet, teeth, etc.

XII. Working with Parents

1). When parents enroll their children in your program, clearly articulate to them your policy on supporting ethnic differences, and your policy of not permitting derogatory remarks by children in your program.

2). Ask parents of children with different racial and ethnic backgrounds if they could come to the classroom to talk to the children and share their culture, language, music, art, or stories (oral or written).

3). Ask parents of children with different racial and ethnic backgrounds how they transfer their culture and racial values to their children. Ask them if they would like to provide some of these activities to children in the program.

4). Ask parents of children with different racial and ethnic backgrounds what they advise their children when other children use discriminatory words towards them.

5). Call parents of children who seem unable to respect differences in children in your classroom. If the negative behavior continues, resolve it as you would other continual unacceptable behavior: biting, disruption, etc.

6) Don't allow children of different racial and ethnic backgrounds to get away with behavior that's unacceptable from other children. Do not let them use negative words or remarks towards non-minority children.